

Health Brief

A Healthy Pregnancy



The more you know about health issues—and your own health in particular—the better you can take care of yourself. This *Health Brief* provides basic health information. To learn more about this topic, please consult your doctor or pharmacist.

Pregnancy brings many changes to a woman's body, and it's important to stay in the best state of health possible—for both yourself and your unborn child. How well you take care of yourself *before* and *during* pregnancy can affect your child's health and development, as well as your ability to experience a healthy pregnancy and delivery, and to care for your baby when you go home from the hospital.

Give your child a “welcome to the world” gift of good health by providing a healthy start. Staying in the peak of good health can help you as you meet the challenges of motherhood.

Note: A glossary of terms is provided at the end of this *Health Brief*. Words defined in the glossary are marked with an asterisk (*).

Checking in with Your Doctor

Your doctor will be an important part of your “personal” healthcare team, whether you are



planning a pregnancy or are already pregnant. Your doctor can assess your health status to determine if you have any potential risks that may harm you or your baby. If you use any prescription or over-the-counter medications, contact your healthcare provider immediately before continuing to use any of them to make sure they are safe to use while pregnant. Certain medications, remedies, and supplements are not healthy for your unborn child.

At your first prenatal appointment, your doctor may take blood and urine tests to check your blood cell counts and nutrient levels. You also may have a Pap smear, which checks the health of your cervix for a safe delivery. Another possible test is an ultrasound to see how your baby is developing and growing.

It's essential that you build a good relationship with your doctor and nursing staff.¹ These are the people you will rely upon to answer any questions and concerns during your pregnancy. Friends and

relatives may give you well-meaning advice, but your healthcare team is who you should turn to for health and medical issues. If you have a family history of pregnancy difficulties or birth defects, inform your doctor. Together, you and your doctor may decide to complete screening tests for certain conditions.



Your Pre-Pregnancy Health

Choosing to have a baby is a momentous decision. Once you make that decision, it's time to start preparing your body for a successful pregnancy and a healthy baby. A good first step is to make an appointment with your doctor to evaluate your health. Let the doctor know you are considering pregnancy or trying to become pregnant. Your doctor can then advise you about medications you can safely continue to use. You should follow the recommendations for pregnant women mentioned in this *Health Brief*.

Even if you are just thinking about having a baby, ask your doctor about starting a prenatal vitamin. Prenatal vitamins should contain at least 1 mg of folic acid, in addition to iron, calcium, and other important vitamins and minerals that are essential for healthy development of the baby.

You and your doctor may also decide that you should have genetic counseling and possibly

have tests done for certain genetic conditions such as Tay-Sachs disease and cystic fibrosis, or blood disorders such as sickle-cell anemia and thalassemia.²

Staying Well During Pregnancy

Pregnancy can be a very stressful time in your life, so you must do what you can to stay healthy. Some basic good-health tips include the following:⁷

- Get plenty of sleep each day.
- Keep all your healthcare provider appointments.
- Exercise regularly—upon the advice of your doctor.
- Follow a well-balanced diet, and do not skip meals. Your doctor will advise you on what weight gain is appropriate for you.
- Drink plenty of nonalcoholic, noncaffeinated fluids.
- Do not smoke or use tobacco products.

What to Eat During Pregnancy

Remember that the foods you eat can directly affect your unborn baby, so it is essential that you eat a healthy and balanced diet. A healthy and balanced diet means you are eating foods from the five basic food groups: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy foods, and protein foods. Try to incorporate foods into your diet that are fortified or enriched (such as grains, cereals, rice, breads, or pasta) or contain folate (such as orange juice, green leafy vegetables, beans, peanuts, broccoli, asparagus, peas, or lentils).¹

The American Dietetic Association recommends that women over the age of 14 increase their food intake by 300 kcal/day or less—as their physician recommends—during pregnancy.² Table 1 shows the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities' suggested daily servings of the major food groups for pregnant women to follow.¹ Foods that are low in fat and high in fiber are also important in your diet.

Certain foods may be harmful to your baby. The following are foods that may be harmful

and should only be eaten in moderation during pregnancy.^{3, 4} (As this advice varies with the type of food, you should speak with your doctor if you are concerned.)

- Raw meat, such as sushi and rare beef
- Deli meats, soft cheeses, and unpasteurized milk
- Fortified instant oatmeal
- Greater-than-recommended amounts of raw/cooked vegetables, meat, fish, and poultry containing large amounts of vitamin A
- Shark, swordfish, king mackerel, fresh tuna, sea bass, and tilefish (also called golden or white snapper), which may contain high amounts of mercury
- Blue fish, striped bass, salmon, pike, trout, and walleye, which may come from contaminated lakes and rivers
- Raw shellfish and eggs, which may be contaminated with algae and salmonella
- Large quantities of foods and beverages containing caffeine, which—during pregnancy—have been linked to miscarriages, premature birth, and low-birthweight infants. Some studies claim that as little as two cups of coffee per day slightly increase the risks to your developing baby.
- Unwashed vegetables, which may contain harmful toxins

Table 1: Daily Dietary Recommendations

Food Group	Number of Servings	Serving Size
Milk or dairy products	4 to 6	1 cup = 1 serving
Vegetables	3 to 5	½ cup = 1 serving
Fruit	2 to 4	1 medium apple = 1 serving
Whole-grain breads, cereals, rice, or pasta	6 to 11	1 slice of bread = 1 serving
Meat, fish, poultry, dried beans, eggs, or nuts	3 to 4	2 oz to 3 oz = 1 serving
Water	6 to 8	8 oz = 1 serving

Vitamin and Mineral Supplementation

A balanced diet should provide your unborn baby with most of the nutrients he or she needs, but you and your baby may still need some additional help. Prenatal vitamins are an excellent source for getting additional folic acid, iron, calcium, and other nutrients vital for proper growth and the prevention of birth defects in your baby.

- Iron helps to prevent anemia* and thus reduces fatigue.
- Calcium is essential in adults, but is much more important for the development of strong bones in your baby.
- Folic acid is one of the most essential nutrients your body needs during pregnancy. It prevents birth defects such as cleft lip*, congenital heart disease*, and spinal defects.

In addition to iron and folic acid, prenatal vitamins contain several other essential nutrients. *Before taking any nutritional or herbal supplements, always talk first with your healthcare provider* who will determine if you need additional supplementation from a prenatal vitamin.

Staying Active During Pregnancy

Staying in shape through exercise during pregnancy can contribute to a healthy pregnancy and can be beneficial during this time. During pregnancy, exercising regularly can help reduce backaches, constipation, bloating, and swelling. However, do not exercise to lose weight while you are pregnant as this could harm you and your baby.

If you have been exercising regularly before pregnancy, it is *generally* safe to continue your current routine—providing you make a few adjustments. Make sure you get your doctor's OK to continue. Before beginning an exercise program, though, consult your healthcare provider to make sure your exercise plan is safe for you and your unborn child. Be sure to start any new exercise program very slowly, and do not overexert yourself.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, created by the Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Agriculture, suggest that pregnant women who do not have medical or pregnancy complications exercise moderately for 30 minutes on most, if not all, days of the week.⁴ Following are some guidelines for exercising during pregnancy:^{3,5}

- Reduce your exercise intensity, or stop if you feel any unusual discomfort.
- Never exercise to the point of exhaustion or breathlessness.
- During your exercise, take frequent breaks.
- Drink plenty of fluids during exercise.
- Do not exercise in hot weather.
- Do not lift weights above your head or use weights that will strain your lower back muscles.
- Do not do exercises that involve lying down, especially during your second and third trimesters.
- Always stretch before and after exercising.
- Wear comfortable clothes, and use footwear that provides strong ankle and arch support.
- Avoid rocky terrain or unstable ground when you exercise.
- Avoid snow and water skiing, horseback riding, and contact sports.



Suggested aerobic activities (which help condition the heart and lungs) include swimming, walking, stationary cycling, and stair climbing. Kegel exercises* can help strengthen the muscles that support the urethra, bladder, uterus, and rectum. Seek the guidance of a health professional or qualified personal trainer to help you properly perform these activities.³

Quitting Tobacco Use

It's been proven that cigarette smoke contains more than 2,500 chemicals—many of which can harm you *and* your baby. Babies of smokers have a greater chance of lower survival rates, having health problems during the newborn period, and chronic disabilities such as cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and learning problems.

If you smoke or use other tobacco products, *it's vital you stop immediately to protect your baby's health.* It's never too late to quit using tobacco; in fact, women who stop smoking in their first trimester* of pregnancy decrease the risk of having a low-birthweight baby.

Using tobacco also increases a woman's risk for having placental* complications, which results in heavy bleeding during delivery and can put her and her baby's life at risk.⁴

Even if you do not use tobacco but are exposed to secondhand smoke, it is potentially harmful to you and your baby's health. Secondhand smoke exposure while pregnant has been linked to low birthweight and reduced growth. Avoid situations where you may be exposed to secondhand smoke, and ask any smokers at home to refrain from smoking indoors. If you or someone at home needs assistance to quit smoking, your healthcare provider can suggest a tobacco cessation program.⁴ If you use tobacco and are not yet pregnant, but are planning to conceive, quit using tobacco first. Get past that hurdle *before* trying to conceive.

Avoiding Alcohol During Pregnancy

Every year, approximately 8,000 to 13,000 babies are born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)—the only preventable cause of mental retardation in children. To prevent FAS, avoid consuming alcohol during pregnancy and while nursing.

Fetal alcohol syndrome is a lifelong condition that affects a baby both physically and mentally. Physically, FAS babies have an abnormally small body, eyes, and cheeks; in addition, they never catch up in normal growth. Mentally, these children have poor coordination, a short attention span, and behavioral problems. As adults, they typically face numerous social challenges.

Avoiding alcohol while pregnant is also good for you: Doing so can help you decrease your risk of having a miscarriage, a low-birthweight baby, or a stillbirth. Remember that many over-the-counter products contain alcohol (some cough and cold products, elixirs, etc.). Make sure you check with your doctor before using any medications during pregnancy. If you get his or her OK, always check the ingredients when purchasing over-the-counter products.

If you have a problem with alcohol, discuss it with your doctor. The following organizations can also help: ⁴

- The National Council on Alcoholism: 1-800-622-2255
- AdCare: 1-800-ALCOHOL
- Alcoholics Anonymous: Please check your local phone directory

Weight Gain

Until delivery, your body will be undergoing many changes—an obvious one being weight gain. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, on average, women gain 25 lbs to 30 lbs during the course of a pregnancy. Since everyone's different, you may or may not experience that same weight gain. Remember that eating a healthy and well-balanced diet is most important.

The amount of recommended weight gain varies significantly depending on your prepregnancy weight.¹ Your doctor will monitor your weight during your pregnancy.



Your Changing Body

Pregnancy is a time of change and adjustment for your body, so it's not surprising that you may experience some discomfort. Weight gain is only one of the transformations your body will be undergoing. The following list discusses some of the other changes women commonly may experience. Please contact your healthcare provider if you have any questions.²

Nausea and vomiting (morning sickness):

During the first few months of pregnancy, you may experience some nausea and vomiting. Although most women have it early in the morning, some experience morning sickness throughout the day. Generally, morning sickness diminishes or completely stops after a few months. In the meantime, these tips may help:

- Eat frequent, small meals.
- Avoid fatty, fried, or spicy foods.
- Try starchy foods (toast, dry cereal, crackers).
- Drink carbonated, caffeine-free beverages between meals.

Constipation: Constipation is a preventable condition; left untreated, though, it can lead to more problems and additional discomfort. These tips can help prevent constipation:

- Eat more fresh or dried fruit, raw vegetables, and whole-grain cereals and breads.
- Drink at least eight to 10 8oz glasses of water every day.
- Avoid caffeine (in soda, coffee, tea, etc.).

Varicose veins and hemorrhoids: As your baby grows inside you, you may notice swollen veins raised above the surface of your skin on your legs and rectum. This usually results from pressure of the baby on the large veins behind the uterus. These tips may help prevent varicose veins during pregnancy:

- Avoid tight knee-high socks or garters.
- Sit with your legs and feet raised.

Leg cramps: You may occasionally experience leg cramps. This is normal as your body makes a few changes in the way it uses calcium. Try these ways to remedy leg cramps:

- Increase your calcium intake by eating more dairy products or green leafy vegetables, or talk to your doctor about taking a calcium supplement.
- Stretch your leg muscles often.
- Wrap the leg area in a warm heating pad.

Fatigue and dizziness: As your body adjusts to the growth of your unborn baby, you may find yourself experiencing fatigue or even dizzy spells now and then. These tips may help:

- You can treat these problems by simply lying down.
- If you want to avoid being tired, try to relax more and get enough sleep.

If these symptoms do not improve or become bothersome, talk with your doctor.

Headaches: Tension headaches are common during pregnancy, especially during the first trimester.

Lack of sleep or general fatigue, sinus congestion, allergies, eyestrain, stress, depression, hunger, or dehydration are all potential causes of headaches. Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) is the only medication considered safe to use for aches, pain, and fever during pregnancy. Try these ideas for heading off or coping with headaches:

- Find out what triggered the pain, and avoid it.
- Place cold compresses on your forehead or at the base of your neck.
- Take a warm shower, and wash your face with cold water.
- Get a massage from a certified professional massage therapist.
- Don't allow yourself to get hungry, and avoid fatigue.
- Use relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing.



When to Call Your Doctor

As part of your healthcare team, your doctor is the person you should contact with any questions or concerns about your health or the health of your unborn child. Contact your doctor *immediately* if you notice any of the following problems during your pregnancy: ¹

- Blood or fluid discharge from your vagina
- Sudden or extreme swelling of your face or fingers

- Headaches that are severe or will not go away
- Nausea and vomiting that will not go away
- Dim or blurry vision
- Pain or cramps in your lower or upper abdomen
- Chills or fever
- A decrease in your baby's movements
- Less urine or a burning sensation when you urinate
- Any illness or infection

Emotional Health and Support

You may be experiencing many emotions as a result of planning a pregnancy or being pregnant. Perhaps you're excited (or nervous) about becoming a parent. You may be concerned about upcoming financial responsibilities. You may be eager to learn all that you can about being pregnant. It is normal to feel overwhelmed, tired, or burdened at times. Therefore, it is important to have the support of family, friends, or organizational support groups. Share your feelings with your doctor and ask for help when needed. Your health is just as important as that of your baby.



Conclusion

Pregnancy is a time in your life when maintaining good health is especially important. Always remember that the choices you make during this time can affect your child for the rest of his or her life. If you are planning to become pregnant, there's a

lot you can do to maintain or improve your health before conceiving. Do not hesitate to contact your healthcare provider with any questions or concerns.

Glossary

- **Anemia:** A condition caused by low levels of iron.
- **Cleft lip:** A birth defect in which the parts of the upper lip fail to unite, so abnormal fissures can be visible.
- **Congenital heart disease:** A condition that is present at birth, as a result of either heredity or environmental influences.
- **Fetus:** A term used to describe a growing human three months after conception.
- **Kegel exercise:** A form of exercise used to strengthen the pelvic floor muscles through repetitive contractions of the muscles used to stop urinary flow.
- **Placenta:** Tissue that joins the fetus to the maternal uterus and allows oxygen, water, and nutrients from the mother's blood to pass to the fetus.
- **Trimester:** A period or term of three months used to help identify different stages of pregnancy.

Resources

These organizations offer special information or support for pregnant women.

- **American Pregnancy Association**
For reproductive and pregnancy wellness and educational information
1-800-672-2296
www.americanpregnancy.org.
- **Lamaze International**
For childbirth education information
1-800-368-4404
www.lamaze-child.com.
- **March of Dimes Resource Center**
For information on pregnancy, birth defects, genetics, and environmental hazards during pregnancy
1-888-MODIMES (663-4637)
www.modimes.org.

- **Sidelines National Support Network**
For women with complicated pregnancies
1-949-497-2265
www.sidelines.org.
- **The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)**
For information on pregnancy and women's health
1-202-638-5577
www.acog.org.

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